

NEW PUBLICATIONS.

THOUGHTS ABOUT ART. By FREDERIC HAMILTON, Esq.
PP. 325. Roberts Brothers.

The issue of a new edition of this work, in a separate and enlarged form, will renew the favorable attention which it received at the time of its original publication, in connection with the popular sketches entitled "The Painter's Camp." Mr. Hamilton is a landscape painter of excellent reputation in England; but he by no means confines himself to handling the pencil; he is a man of wide general culture, an acute thinker on the philosophy of art, and the master of a singularly graceful and attractive style. If he does not deal in the gorgeous purple rhetoric of Mr. Ruskin, he is a far more judicious and consistent writer, without the love of paradox which infects the productions of the former, and on the whole, a safer and more instructive guide in the study of Art. Mr. Hamilton justly appreciates the difficulties of writing on the subject, and offers many sound suggestions as to the requisite qualifications of a competent Art critic. The theme, as he well remarks, cannot be grasped in its large relations, by minds habituated to occupied with other matters, and whose only claim to treat of them is their faculty of verbal expression. It requires great personal devotion, and untiring enthusiasm, as well as much technical knowledge. He does not maintain, however, that artists themselves should write criticism. A vague opinion seems to prevail in our own artistic circles, and sometimes finds a louder utterance than decorum requires, that no one but the painter or the sculptor can comprehend the difficulties of execution in their respective branches of Art, so no one but a practical master of the chisel and brush should presume to pass a critical judgment on their productions. Mr. Hamilton does not fall in with this idea. No man, he argues, should write on the subject, unless he has been especially educated for the office of criticism. It is not worth while that painters should expend any of their energies on what would be too likely to degenerate into personal recrimination. The true Art critic should belong to a separate class. It should be practically acquainted with the ordinary details of Art, he must be able to draw with delicacy, to understand the secrets of method and color, to take up the textures of the natural landscape, as well as to appreciate the productions of genius; but the real critic can scarcely be an accomplished artist. The painter may often have much to say, but it is seldom that he has the power to say it well. "I was present on one occasion," says Mr. Hamilton, "when a distinguished painter was asked by a young author how it happened that artists so rarely wrote upon their own work." "None," said the painter, "they are so generally deficient in the first rudiments of a literary education." I believe that answer, however, favors the critics to artists, to have been much nearer to the truth than the common theory that there is something essentially incompatible between the literary and artistic intellects." "Writing," he adds, "is always extremely irksome and disagreeable to unpolished people. If the reader had seen certain letters by successful painters, he would not wonder at their reeling misery with a pen. It is on record that a famous artist wrote 'academy' 'necessity.' Another excellent artist, who had achieved success in the exhibitions of that society, wrote several letters, in all of which the word 'exhibition' was spelt without the h.—Turner, of course, spelt 'bully' too." But his mistakes, as Mr. Ruskin has observed, are all "eccentric." He never casts his letters, "Englin" for "engraving," "sumni" for "summit," "in Alm" for "les Alpes," and no end of others of the same kind. Persons to whom the mere act of writing is an arduous exertion, the author justly supposes, will not be likely to give any unnecessary time to it. This alone may account for the fact that artists in general are not fond of using the pen. If they were all taught to read and write before they began to paint, as every man before they begin to preach, what writers might be as numerous comparatively as clerical authors. "And if painters," Mr. Hamilton rather tartly suggests, "were so taught to read and write, perhaps they would not paint any worse for it." Mr. Turner had received as good an education as a common English school boy of twelve years, and had been able to write good English, and even spell the French titles to his drawings, he might, even in spite of these attainments, have reached his present rank as a landscape painter—but if painters are often clumsy in criticising each other, Mr. Hamilton does not abstain from freely expressing his opinion on the merits of certain prominent celebrities in literature. In his discussion of the comparative rank of word-painting and color-painting, as an expression of artistic ideas, he assigns their relative place to several of the great English poets. Tennyson, he regards as taking the lead of all the word-painters in the language. He understands the limitations of the art better than any other man. He never strays after unattainable fancies. His descriptions never pass the bounds of the art, and are always exquisite as far as they go. Shelley's painting resembles that of Turner. It is the same spider, color, and mystery, the same unreality and abstraction. Byron's word-painting owes all its power to fire of language, and strength of imagery, and is too passionate to be in any way accurate. Scott's descriptions are often very spirited, but they are not always artistic, and seldom pictorially conceived. Wordsworth knew more of natural scenery than any other writer, knew as much, in fact, as many a professed landscape painter, but as an artist in words he attempted too much. His descriptions are marked by delicate truthfulness, evincing a power of observation very rare in literature, but they have little effect on readers ignorant of landscape, because they require a degree of memory and imagination which no one can possess who is not familiarly conversant with Nature.—Among other topics which are treated with great ability and good sense by the author, are "Transcendentalism in Painting," "The Law of Progress in Art," "Picture Buying," "Furniture," "The Artistic Spirit," the essays on which are especially worthy, not only of a cursory perusal, but of assiduous study. The whole volume is adapted to give a wholesome stimulus to the taste for Art, and to point it in an intelligent and wise direction. With a knowledge of the principles which it sets forth in a style of peculiar fascination, the reader is prepared to enjoy the wonders of ancient and modern Art, with a fresh sense of their beauty, and a critical recognition of the sources of their power.

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